

Crisis Communication and Business Survival: A Strategic Imperative for Brand Protection During Scandals and Disruptions

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Abstract

Move fast and break things. The digital era makes scandals spread swiftly because audiences now receive news through social media platforms like Twitter and video-sharing on smartphones. Product malfunctions, executive scandals, cyberattacks, natural disasters, public relations meltdowns, and international conflict are just some examples of crises businesses will face. Poor communication before, during, and after a crisis can kill a brand. This review article examines existing scholarships and best practices for crisis communication and suggests that responsive, proactive, values-driven communication is part art and science. More importantly, it is one of the most important strategies a business can utilize to safeguard its reputation and long-term success. The article will cover major theory and developments, stages of crisis response, common PR fails, and practical recommendations for crisis proving your business.

Keywords: Crisis Communication, Reputation Management, Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Brand Resilience, Stakeholder Trust

Introduction

The High Stakes of Crisis Management

A situation becomes a crisis when it negatively affects any aspect of an organization's performance, reputation, financial results, or stakeholder interests (Coombs, 2015). Social media means news of an executive sipping drinks with bikini girls or your product malfunctioning reaches thousands of viewers in minutes. Negative media has a way of permanently tarnishing a brand's image. For example, Volkswagen's 2015 "Diesel gate" emissions cheating scandal resulted in > €30 billion in fines and settlements and a significant loss of customer loyalty (Jung & Park, 2018). On the other hand, many corporations have weathered the storm of scandal through ethical, transparent crisis communication. Johnson & Johnson's communication strategy during the 1982 Tylenol poisonings is credited with saving their reputation (Benoit, 2015). Crisis longevity depends less on the scandal itself and more on how your organization communicates about it. In this article, we will review how to keep your brand afloat even when the waters around you are rapidly draining.

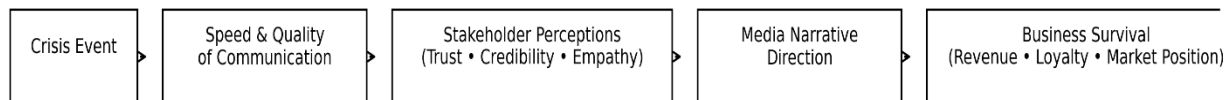


Figure 1. *Crisis Communication → Brand Survival Pathway.*

Theoretical Foundations of Crisis Communication

Two dominant theories underpin modern crisis communication strategy.

- **Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT):** Created by Timothy Coombs (2015), this theory aims to provide practitioners with guidelines that match the type of

crisis to the appropriate communication strategy. The theory classifies crises by the level of responsibility that will be ascribed to the organization (victim, accidental, or intentional) and best response strategies (i.e. “deny” if your company is only the victim of rumor). Building off attribution theory, SCCT dictates that your response should match stakeholder perceptions of who is to blame for the crisis to minimize reputation damage.

Crisis Cluster	Stakeholder Attribution	Recommended Strategy
Victim	Low Responsibility	Deny / Bolster
Accidental	Moderate Responsibility	Diminish / Justify
Preventable	High Responsibility	Apology / Corrective Action

Figure 2. Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) Response Matrix

- Image Repair Theory:** According to William Benoit (2015), effective communication during an attack should focus on defending the organization's image against possible harm. Benoit’s theory centers around five general strategies of image repair: denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and apologizing (mortification). Each of these subcategories can be used to navigate attacks, though like SCCT, your response should be supported by evidence. Each crisis requires a unique response because no two crises are identical.

The Phases of Strategic Crisis Communication
 The 3 Phases of Strategic Crisis Communication
 Effective crisis management requires actions before, during and after an incident occurs.

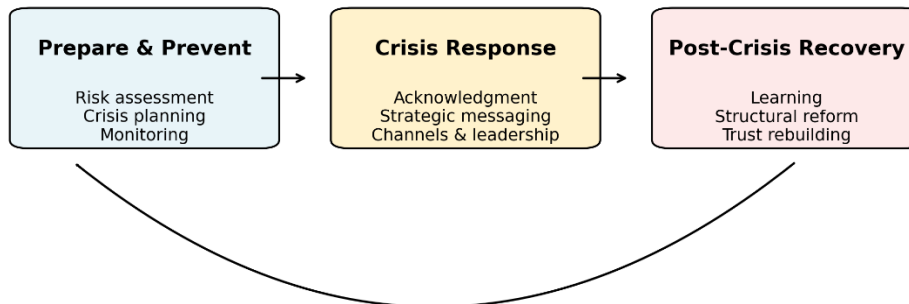


Figure 3. The 3 Phases of Strategic Crisis Communication Lifecycle

Phase 1: Prepare & Prevent

Building organizational resilience means:

- Assessing Risk:** Identifying weak spots before they’re exploited. Look for vulnerabilities in your processes, supply chain, or executive behaviors.
- Crisis Planning:** Developing a written crisis plan that’s easily accessible and adaptable. Include: a cross-functional crisis team, contact list, preapproved communication channels, holding statement drafts, etc. (Crandall, Parnell, & Spillan, 2013).
- Designate & Train Spokespersons:** Media training your leaders to speak clearly, compassionately, and confidently.
- Monitoring & Listening:** Employ social listening tools to pick up on potential threats early.

2. Crisis Response
The Critical 24-48 Hours – Anatomy of an Effective Response

When a crisis strikes, the initial response sets the narrative and often dictates the long-term reputational and financial outcome. This phase must be characterized by operational precision and communicative clarity. Extending beyond best practices, we deconstruct the critical components.

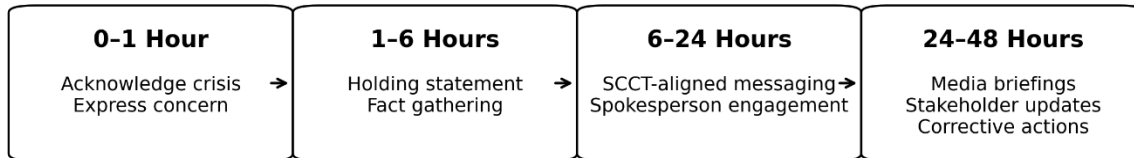


Figure 4 outlines the critical communication actions required during the first 48 hours of a crisis, highlighting how response timing shapes narrative control and stakeholder trust.

- **The First Hour: Acknowledgment and Command**
The era of waiting for a full-page ad in tomorrow’s newspaper is over. The "golden hour" principle demands an initial acknowledgment within the first 60 minutes on the company’s most prominent owned channels (e.g., corporate Twitter/X account, website banner). This is not a detailed statement but a clear demonstration of organizational awareness and control. The message must: 1) Acknowledge the event, 2) Express primary concern for those affected (not the company’s stock price), and 3) Promise more information by a specific, near-future time (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2019). For example, a statement might read: "We are aware of and deeply concerned by the incident reported at our [Location] facility. Our top priority is the safety of our employees and the surrounding community. We are gathering facts and will provide a further update within two hours." This immediately halts the vacuum of information, which would otherwise be filled with speculation and third-party accounts.
- **Strategic Message Development: SCCT in Action**
Following the initial holding statement, the crisis team must rapidly apply Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCottbs, 2015) to craft the primary narrative. This involves:
 - **Clustering:** Determining the crisis cluster (victim, accidental, preventable). A data breach due to a sophisticated, novel cyber-attack (victim cluster) warrants a different posture than a breach due to known, unpatched software vulnerabilities (preventable cluster).
 - **Strategy Selection:** Choosing the primary and supporting response strategies. For a preventable crisis like product contamination due to a lapse in quality control, the only credible strategy is "mortification" “a full apology coupled with a clear outline of "corrective action" (Benoit, 2015). Attempts to "diminish" the offense ("only a small batch was affected") or "scapegoat" a junior employee will backfire, perceived as insincere and evasive.
 - **Message Pillars:** Building all communications on three non-negotiable pillars: Empathy (for victims), Action (what we are doing to fix the problem and

prevent recurrence), and Transparency (a commitment to ongoing updates, even if the news is negative).

- **Channel Strategy: Multi-Platform, Tailored Messaging**
A monolithic message broadcast everywhere is insufficient. Effective response requires a nuanced, channel-specific approach:
 - **Social media:** Used for rapid updates, directing traffic to a central crisis hub (often a dedicated page on the corporate website), and engaging in active rumor correction. The tone must be conversational yet authoritative.
 - **Direct Stakeholder Communication:** Employees, investors, and key B2B partners must hear critical updates directly via email, intranet, or phone calls before or simultaneously with public announcements. Failure to do so breeds internal distrust and secondary crises.
 - **Earned Media:** A well-prepared primary spokesperson (ideally the CEO for existential crises) holds a press conference, demonstrating leadership and accountability. All statements must align perfectly with the core message pillars. Providing clear, factual FAQs to journalists can help shape more accurate coverage.
 - **Digital Crisis Hub:** A single, easily navigable webpage serves as the canonical source for all updates, official statements, contact information for affected parties, and timelines for corrective actions.
- **The Role of the CEO as Communicator-in-Chief**
In severe crises, the CEO must be visible. Their role is not to recite technical details but to embody the organization’s values and remorse. Performance matters: verbal and non-verbal cues of empathy (active listening, sober tone, appropriate dress) are critical. The contrast between United Airlines’ initial impersonal response to the passenger removal incident in 2017 and the later, more empathetic (though delayed) CEO statement underscores the reputational cost of leader invisibility (Gillespie & Dietz, 2009).

Table 1. Common Crisis Communication Failures vs. Best Practices

Common Failure	Typical Outcome	Best Practice	Strategic Benefit
Silence	Rumors spread	Early acknowledgment	Narrative control
Legal-only tone	Public anger	Empathy-first messaging	Trust preservation
CEO absence	Leadership doubt	Visible leadership	Credibility
Inconsistent updates	Confusion	Central crisis hub	Information clarity

3. Recovery, Learning, and Systemic Reformation

Post-Crisis

The cessation of negative headlines does not signify the end of the crisis. The post-crisis phase is a multi-year journey of reputational repair and organizational transformation, determining whether the event becomes a scarring failure or a catalyst for improvement.

• **Staged Recovery Communication**

Recovery communication should be staged to match stakeholder readiness and demonstrated progress:

1. **Operational Updates (Weeks 1-4):** Continue providing factual updates on the implementation of immediate corrective actions. (e.g., "The recalled batch has been 95% retrieved," "The investigation phase one report is complete").
2. **Structural Change Announcements (Months 1-6):** Announce lasting changes to policies, procedures, or governance. This might include appointing a new Chief Safety Officer, forming an independent advisory board, or investing in new technology. This demonstrates learning and prevents future recurrence.
3. **Values Reaffirmation Campaign (Months 6-24):** Launch a brand campaign that explicitly or implicitly addresses the crisis's root cause. For example, after a privacy scandal, a "Your Data, Your Control" campaign highlighting new user tools and privacy commitments helps rebuild trust through demonstrated behavior change.

• **The Integrity of the Post-Mortem**

A rigorous, often third party-facilitated, post-crisis analysis is non-negotiable. The goal is not to assign individual blame but to understand systemic failures. Key questions include: Where did our risk assessment fail? Why did our culture allow this? At which communication node did delays or distortions occur? The findings must be synthesized into a public-facing report (with necessary redactions for legal sensitivity) and an internal action plan (Crandall et al., 2013). Hiding the post-mortem findings destroys any credibility gained during the response.

• **Long-Term Reputational Repair: The Persuasion of Deeds**

Image repair theory notes that communication alone is insufficient; it must be matched by "corrective action" (Benoit, 2015). Stakeholders, especially in the digital age, engage in a "watchdog" mentality, monitoring for a return to the status quo. Companies must:

- **Embed Changes:** Integrate the lessons learned into employee training, performance metrics, and supplier contracts.
- **Measure Trust:** Regularly track brand sentiment, trust metrics, and stakeholder perceptions through surveys and social listening, treating them as key performance indicators.
- **Narrate the Journey:** Use anniversary updates or sustainability reports to transparently discuss the changes made since the crisis, not as a self-congratulatory exercise, but as an accountability mechanism. Patagonia's ongoing transparency about its supply chain challenges, for instance, reinforces a narrative of continuous improvement and honesty.

• **The Ultimate Goal: Resilience**

The culmination of an effective post-crisis phase is not merely a return to pre-crisis normality but the development of enhanced organizational resilience. A company that has genuinely

learned from a scandal emerges with a more robust crisis plan, a culture more attuned to ethical risks, leadership trained in empathetic communication, and stakeholder relationships tested and strengthened through adversity. This transforms the crisis from a purely defensive event into a paradoxical opportunity for systemic strengthening and deeper brand legitimacy (Ulmer et al., 2019).

Conclusion

From Crisis Containment to Brand Integrity – Embedding Communicative Resilience

Surviving a crisis takes planning, diligence, and organizational courage. However, as we have reviewed, crisis communication is not a linear process to survive a public scandal or global pandemic. It should be a holistic approach ingrained into your company policies, culture, and overall business strategy.

Whether facing down a consumer boycott or recovering from an employee data breach, your organization's communication strategy will dictate how it weathers the storm. While no two crises are the same, nor is there a one-size-fits-all strategy, there are frameworks and best practices that will allow your brand to respond to adversity with integrity.

Three things rise above all else: Prepare beforehand, respond swiftly from a place of empathy and care, and do the work after the crisis is over.

Preparation will allow your brand to react quickly during times of stress. Take the time to consistently audit risks, develop potential scenarios and mitigation strategies, and train your spokespeople. When (not if) a crisis occurs, you will thank yourself for preparing your teams for all of the "what-ifs." Not only will you be ready to respond, but your team will have developed the crisis "muscle memory" to do so confidently under pressure.

How your brand responds in the first 24–48 hours will speak volumes about your organization. Pinning your response strategy on your legal team may save you from lawsuits, but it will not win you any brand loyalty points. Your response should come from a place of empathy and care for your consumers and stakeholders. Own your mistakes quickly, communicate what you are doing to fix the problem, and take legal advice where necessary to do what's right by your customers. While checklists like SCCT are important to respond with consistency and strategy, never forget that you are communicating with real humans who are hurting. Show your care.

Rebuilding your brand reputation after a crisis occurs is where things get tricky. In my experience, this is where most brands drop the ball completely. Sure, you had a crisis communications plan you executed, but now what? Do we just pretend like it never happened and move on? Absolutely not. Crisis recovery takes time and effort. It is crucial to show your stakeholders you are holding yourself accountable not only through words but through action. Follow up on your crisis response with a post-mortem report, update your procedures that failed, and track your reputation metrics as you would any other business KPI. This will not only help your organization recover but will allow you to use your crisis as a learning opportunity moving forward. Share with your community and other businesses what you learned from this experience and your organization can come out of it with increased transparency and legitimacy.

In conclusion, there will always be unpredictable circumstances that your brand will face. However, stakeholders don't expect your brand to be perfect. They do expect your brand to stand behind its promises. When the waters get rough, your consumers and stakeholders want to know you have their backs.

Show your dedication to your brand's values through consistent actions and decisions. Take every opportunity to show your stakeholders that you practice what you preach. Take crisis communication out of the crisis and treat it like what it should be: damage control. Instead, think of it as “brand integrity assurance.”

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